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# Mapping the Futures

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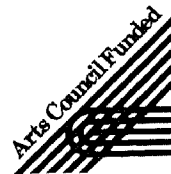
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Local cultures, global change

Edited by Jon Bird, Barry Curtis,  
Tim Putnam, George Robertson  
and Lisa Tickner



London and New York



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## Chapter 4

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# Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place

*Doreen Massey*

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### **TIME-SPACE COMPRESSION AND THE GEOMETRIES OF POWER**

Much of what is written about space, place and postmodern times emphasizes a new phase in what Marx once called 'the annihilation of space by time'. The process is argued, or more usually asserted, to have gained a new momentum, to have reached a new stage. It is a phenomenon which Harvey (1989) has termed 'time-space compression'. And the general acceptance that something of the sort is going on is marked by the almost obligatory use in the literature of terms and phrases such as speed-up, global village, overcoming spatial barriers, the disruption of horizons and so forth.

Yet the concept of time-space compression remains curiously unexamined. In particular, it is a concept which often remains without much social content, or with only a very restricted, one-sided, social content. There are many aspects to this. One is, of course, the question of to what extent its current characterization represents very much a Western, colonizer's view. The sense of dislocation which so many writers on the subject apparently feel at the sight of a once well-known local street now lined with a succession of cultural imports – the pizzeria, the kebab house, the branch of the middle-eastern bank – must have been felt for centuries, though from a very different point of view, by colonized peoples all over the world as they watched the importation of, maybe even used, the products of, first, European colonization, maybe British (from new forms of transport to liver salts and custard powder); later US products, as they learned to eat wheat instead of rice or corn, to drink Coca-Cola, just as today we try out enchiladas.

But there are just two points which it seems particularly important to raise in the current context. The first concerns causality. Time-space compression is a term which refers to movement and communication across space. It is a phenomenon which implies the geographical stretching-out of social relations (referred to by Giddens (1984) as time-

space distancing), and to our experience of all this. However, those who argue that we are currently undergoing a new phase of accelerated time-space compression usually do so from a very particular view of its determination. For Jameson and for Harvey these things are determined overwhelmingly by the actions of capital (Jameson 1984; Harvey 1989). For Harvey it is, in his own terms, time space and money which make the world go round, and us go round (or not) the world. It is capitalism and its developments which are argued to determine our understanding and our experience of space. This is, however, clearly insufficient. There are many other things that clearly influence that experience, for instance, ethnicity and gender. The degree to which we can move between countries, or walk about the streets at night, or take public transport, or venture out of hotels in foreign cities, is not influenced simply by 'capital'. Harvey describes how Frédéric Moreau, hero of Flaubert's *L'Éducation Sentimentale*,

glides in and out of the differentiated spaces of the city, with the same sort of ease that money and commodities change hands. The whole narrative structure of the book likewise gets lost in perpetual postponements of decisions precisely because Frédéric has enough inherited money to enjoy the luxury of not deciding.

Reflecting on this, Harvey argues that

it was the possession of money that allowed the present to slip through Frédéric's grasp, while opening social spaces to casual penetration. Evidently, time, space and money could be invested with rather different significances, depending upon the conditions and possibilities of trade-off between them.

(Harvey 1989: 263-4)

Time, space and *money*? Did not Frédéric, as he 'casually penetrated' these social spaces, have another little advantage in life, too (see also Massey 1991b)? Or again Birkett, reviewing books on women adventurers and travellers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suggests that 'it is far, far more demanding for a woman to wander now than ever before' (Birkett 1990: 41). The reasons for this, she argues, are a complex mix of colonialism, ex-colonialism, racism, changing gender relations, and relative wealth. Harvey's simple resort to 'money' alone could not begin to get to grips with the issue. (Incidentally, of course, the example also indicates that 'time-space compression' has not been happening for everyone in all spheres of activity.) In other words, and simply put, there is a lot more determining how we experience space than what 'capital' gets up to. Most of the arguments so far around time-space compression do not recognize this. Moreover, to argue for this greater complexity is not in any way to be anti-materialist, it is simply not to reduce materialism to economism.

The second point about the inadequacy of the notion of time-space

compression as it is currently used is that it needs differentiating socially. This is not just a moral or political point about inequality, although that would be sufficient reason to mention it: it is also a conceptual point. Imagine for a moment that you are on a satellite, further out and beyond all actual satellites; you can see 'planet earth' from a distance and, rare for someone with only peaceful intentions, you are equipped with the kind of technology that allows you to see the colours of people's eyes and the number on their number-plates. You can see all the movement and tune-in to all the communication that is going on. Furthest out are the satellites, then aeroplanes, the long haul between London and Tokyo and the hop from San Salvador to Guatemala City. Some of this is people moving, some of it is physical trade, some is media broadcasting. There are faxes, e-mail, film-distribution networks, financial flows and transactions. Look in closer and there are ships and trains, steam trains slogging laboriously up hills somewhere in Asia. Look in closer still and there are lorries and cars and buses and on down further and somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa there's a woman on foot who still spends hours a day collecting water.

Now, I want to make one simple point here, and that is about what one might call the *power-geometry* of it all; the power-geometry of time-space compression. For different social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.

In a sense, at the end of all the spectra are those who are both doing the moving and the communicating and who are in some way in a position of control in relation to it. These are the jet-setters, the ones sending and receiving the faxes and the e-mail, holding the international conference calls, the ones distributing the films, controlling the news, organizing the investments and the international currency transactions. These are the groups who are really, in a sense, in charge of time-space compression; who can effectively use it and turn it to advantage; whose power and influence it very definitely increases. On its more prosaic fringes this group probably includes a fair number of Western academics.

But there are groups who, although doing a lot of physical moving, are not 'in charge' of the process in the same way. The refugees from El Salvador or Guatemala and the undocumented migrant workers from Michoacán in Mexico crowding into Tijuana to make perhaps a fatal dash for it across the border into the USA to grab a chance of a new life. Here the experience of movement, and indeed of a confusing plurality of cultures,

is very different. And there are those from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Caribbean, who come halfway round the world only to get held up in an interrogation room at Heathrow.

Or again, there are those who are simply on the receiving end of time-space compression. The pensioner in a bedsit in any inner city in this country, eating British working-class-style fish and chips from a Chinese take-away, watching a US film on a Japanese television, and not daring to go out after dark. And anyway, the public transport's been cut.

Or – one final example to illustrate a different kind of complexity – there are the people who live in the favelas of Rio; who know global football like the back of their hand, and have produced some of its players; who have contributed massively to global music; who gave us the samba and produced the lambada that everyone was dancing to a few years ago in the clubs of Paris and London; and who have never, or hardly ever, been to downtown Rio. At one level they have been tremendous contributors to what we call time-space compression; and at another level they are imprisoned in it.

This is, in other words, a highly complex social differentiation. There is the dimension of the degree of movement and communication, but also the dimensions of control and of initiation. The ways in which people are inserted into and placed within 'time-space compression' are highly complicated and extremely varied. It is necessary to think through with a bit more conceptual depth, a bit more analytical rigour, quite how these positions are differentiated. Moreover, recognition of this complexity raises the important issue of *which* condition of postmodernity we are talking about – *whose* condition of postmodernity?

More immediately, two points arise from these considerations. The first raises more directly questions of politics. If time-space compression can be imagined in that more socially formed, socially evaluative and differentiated way, then there may be the possibility of developing a politics of mobility and access. For it does seem that mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power. It is not simply a question of unequal distribution, that some people move more than others, some have more control than others. It is that the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people. Differential mobility can weaken the leverage of the already weak. The time-space compression of some groups can undermine the power of others. This is well established and often noted in the relationship between capital and labour. Capital's ability to roam the world further strengthens it in relation to relatively immobile workers, enables it to play off the plant at Genk against the plant at Halewood. It also strengthens its hand against struggling local economies the world over as they compete for the favour of some investment. But also, every time someone uses a car, and thereby increases their personal mobility, they reduce both the social rationale and the financial viability of the public transport system – and thereby also potentially reduce the mobility of those

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who rely on that system. Every time you drive to that out-of-town shopping centre you contribute to the rising prices, even hasten the demise, of the corner shop. And the 'time-space compression' which is involved in producing and reproducing the daily lives of the comfortably-off in first-world societies – not just their own travel but the resources they draw on, from all over the world, to feed their lives – may entail environmental consequences, or hit constraints, that will limit the lives of others before their own. We need to ask, in other words, whether our relative mobility and power over mobility and communication entrenches the spatial imprisonment of other groups.

A politics of mobility might range over issues as broad as wheelchair access, reclaiming the night and the streets of cities for women and for older people, through issues of international migration, to the whole gamut of transport policy itself. Conceptualizing space, mobility and access in a more socially imaginative way, and abandoning easy and excited notions of generalized and undifferentiated time-space compression, might enable us to confront some of these issues rather more inventively.

The second point is simply a question. Why is it that for so many of the academics who write about time-space compression, who are in relative control of their new mobility and means of communication, who jet off to (or from) Los Angeles to give a paper on it, does it generate such feelings of insecurity? Harvey (1989), for instance, constantly writes of vulnerability, insecurity and the unsettling impact of time-space compression. This question is important less in itself than because, as will be argued in the next part of this chapter, it seems also to have generated in them, as a counter to all this insecurity, a very particular (and unprogressive) sense of place.

### **A PROGRESSIVE SENSE OF PLACE**

Those writers who interpret the current phase of time-space compression as primarily generating insecurity also frequently go on to argue that, in the middle of all this flux, one desperately needs a bit of peace and quiet; and 'place' is posed as a source of stability and an unproblematical identity. In that guise, place and the spatially local are rejected by these writers as almost necessarily reactionary. Space/place is characterized, after Heidegger, as Being; and, as such, as a diversion from the progressive dimension of Time as Becoming (see Harvey (1989); and Massey (1991a) for a critique of this position).

There are a number of serious inadequacies in this argument, ranging from the question of why it is assumed that time-space compression will produce insecurity, through the need to face up to – rather than simply deny – people's need for attachment of some sort, whether through place or anything else. It is also problematical that so often this debate, as in the

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case of Harvey, starts off from Heidegger, for if it had not started off from there, perhaps it would never have found itself in this conceptual tangle in the first place.

None the less, it is certainly the case that there is at the moment a recrudescence of some problematical senses of place, from reactionary nationalisms to competitive localisms, to sanitized, introverted obsessions with 'heritage'. Instead of refusing to deal with this, however, it is necessary to recognize it and to try to understand what it represents. Perhaps it is most important to think through what might be an adequately progressive sense of place, one which would fit in with the current global-local times and the feelings and relations they give rise to, *and* one which would be useful in what are, after all, our often inevitably place-based political struggles. The question is how to hold on to that notion of spatial difference, of uniqueness, even of rootedness if people want that, without it being reactionary.

There are a number of distinct ways in which the notion of place which is derived from Heidegger is problematical. One is the idea that places have single essential identities. Another is the idea that the identity of place – the sense of place – is constructed out of an introverted, inward-looking history based on delving into the past for internalized origins, translating the name from the Domesday Book. Wright (1985) confronts both these issues. He recounts the construction and appropriation of Stoke Newington and its past by the arriving middle class (the Domesday Book registers the place as 'Newtowne': 'There is land for two ploughs and a half. . . There are four villanes and thirty seven cottagers with ten acres' (ibid.: 227, 231)), and he contrasts this version with that of other groups – the white working class and the large number of important minority communities.

Another problem with the conception of place which derives from Heidegger is that it seems to require the drawing of boundaries. Geographers have long been exercised by the problem of defining regions, and this question of 'definition' has almost always been reduced to drawing lines around a place. I remember some of my most painful times as a geographer have been spent unwillingly struggling to think how one could draw a boundary around somewhere like 'the East Midlands'. Within cultural studies, some of the notions of 'cultural area' sometimes seem equally to entail this problematical necessity of a boundary: a frame in the sense of a concave line around some area, the inside of which is defined in one way and the outside in another. It is yet another form of the construction of a counterposition between us and them.

And yet if one considers almost any real place, and certainly one not defined primarily by administrative or political boundaries, these supposed characteristics have little real purchase. Take, for instance, a walk down Kilburn High Road, my local shopping centre. It is a pretty ordinary place,

north-west of the centre of London. Under the railway bridge the newspaper-stand sells papers from every county of what my neighbours, many of whom come from there, still often call the Irish Free State. The postboxes down the High Road, and many an empty space on a wall, are adorned with the letters IRA. The bottle and waste-paper banks are plastered this week with posters for a Bloody Sunday commemoration. Thread your way through the often almost stationary traffic diagonally across the road from the newsstand and there's a shop which, for as long as I can remember, has displayed saris in the window. Four life-sized models of Indian women, and reams of cloth. In another newsagent I chat with the man who keeps it, a Muslim unutterably depressed by the war in the Gulf, silently chafing at having to sell the *Sun*. Overhead there is always at least one aeroplane – we seem to be on a flight-path to Heathrow and by the time they're over Kilburn you can see them clearly enough to discern the airline and wonder as you struggle with your shopping where they're coming from. Below, the reason the traffic is snarled up (another odd effect of time-space compression!) is in part because this is one of the main entrances to and escape-routes from London, the road to Staples Corner and the beginning of the M1 to the north. These are just the beginnings of a sketch from immediate impressions but a proper analysis could be done, of the links between Kilburn and the world. And so it could for almost any place.

Kilburn is a place for which I have a great affection; I have lived here many years. It certainly has 'a character of its own'. But it is possible to feel all this without subscribing to any of the Heideggerian notions of 'place' which were referred to above. First, while Kilburn may have a character of its own, it is absolutely not a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place which everyone shares. It could hardly be less so. People's routes through the place, their favourite haunts within it, the connections they make (physically, or by phone or post, or in memory and imagination) between here and the rest of the world vary enormously. If it is now recognized that people have multiple identities, then the same point can be made in relation to places. Moreover, such multiple identities can be either, or both, a source of richness or a source of conflict. Second, it is (or ought to be) impossible even to begin thinking about Kilburn High Road without bringing into play half the world and a considerable amount of British imperialist history. Imagining it this way provokes in you (or at least in me) a really global sense of place. Third, and finally, I certainly could not begin to, nor would I want to, define it by drawing its enclosing boundaries.

So, at this point in the argument, get back in your mind's eye on a satellite; go right out again and look back at the globe. This time, however, imagine not just all the physical movement, nor even all the often invisible communications, but also and especially all the social relations. For as

time-space compression proceeds, in all its complexity, so the geography of social relations changes. In many cases, such relations are increasingly stretched out over space. Economic, political and cultural social relations, each full of power and with internal structures of domination and subordination, stretched out over the planet at every different level, from the household to the local area to the international.

It is from that perspective that it is possible to envisage an alternative interpretation of place. In this interpretation, what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus. If one moves in from the satellite towards the globe, holding all those networks of social relations and movements and communications in one's head, then each place can be seen as a particular, unique point of their intersection. The uniqueness of a place, or a locality, in other words is constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are actually constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, a region or even a continent. Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extra-verted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.

This is not a question of making the ritualistic connections to 'the wider system' – the people in the local meeting who bring up international capitalism every time you try to have a discussion about rubbish-collection – the point is that there are real relations with real content, economic, political, cultural, between any local place and the wider world in which it is set. In economic geography, the argument has long been accepted that it is not possible to understand the 'inner city', for instance its loss of jobs, the decline of manufacturing employment there, by looking only at the inner city. Any adequate explanation has to set the inner city in its wider geographical context. Perhaps it is appropriate to think how that kind of understanding could be extended to the notion of a sense of place.

These arguments, then, highlight a number of ways in which a progressive concept of place might be developed. First of all, it is absolutely not static and in no way relates to the Heideggerian view of Space/Place as Being. If places can be conceptualized in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not static. They are processes. One of the great one-liners in Marxist exchanges has for long been 'ah, but capital is not a thing, it's a process'. Perhaps this should be said also about places; that places are

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processes, too. One of the problematical aspects of the Heideggerian approach, and one which from the point of view of the physical sciences now looks out of date, is the strict dichotomization of time and space. In the current debate around molecular biology and theories of evolution we find this other one-liner, from an article with the subtitle 'The integration of science with human experience', and completely apposite to the discussion here: 'form is dynamic through and through' (Ho 1988). In other words, form *is* process. It is invalid in that sense simply to dichotomize between diachronic and synchronic, between time and space. And on the other side of the academic disciplines, here we have an argument about Rimbaud, who invites us

to conceive of space not as a static reality, but as active, generative, to experience space as created by an interaction, as something that our bodies reactivate, and that through this reactivation, in turn modifies and transforms us. . . . [T]he poem [*Rêvé pour l'hiver*] creates a 'non-passive' spatiality – space as a specific form of operations and interactions

(Ross 1988, cited in Gregory 1990: 9).

Second, places do not have to have boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures. 'Boundaries' may, of course, be necessary – for the purposes of certain types of studies for instance – but they are not necessary for the conceptualization of a place itself. Definition in this sense does not have to be through simple counterposition to the outside; it can come, in part, precisely through the particularity of linkage *to* that 'outside' which is therefore itself part of what constitutes the place. This therefore gets away from that association between penetrability and vulnerability. Mumford (1961: 5) has characterized human life as swinging between two poles, 'movement and settlement'. As Robins argues, 'these two poles have been at the heart of urban development – the city as container and the city as flow' (Robins 1991: 11). But why, then, does settlement so often have to be characterized as 'enclosure' (Robins 1991: 12; Emberley 1989: 756)? For it is this kind of characterization that makes invasion by newcomers so threatening. A notion of places as social relations, on the other hand, facilitates the conceptualization of the relation between the centre and the periphery, and the arrival of the previously marginal in the (first-world-city) centre (although it should be pointed out, since it is usually forgotten, that some alien others – women – have been living there for a long time).

Third, clearly places do not have single, unique 'identities'; they are full of internal differences and conflicts (Massey 1991a). Davis (1985) captures this in his studies of Los Angeles. It is exemplified too by London's Docklands, a place currently quite clearly defined by conflict: a conflict

over what its past has been (the nature of its 'heritage'); conflict over what should be its present development; conflict over what could be its future.

Fourth, and finally, none of this denies place nor the importance of the specificity of place. The specificity of place is continually reproduced, but it is not a specificity which results from some long, internalized history. There are a number of sources of this specificity – the uniqueness of place (Massey 1984). There is the fact that the wider relations in which places are set are themselves spatially internally differentiated. *Contra* some of the debate within cultural studies, globalization does not entail simply homogenization. Indeed, the globalization of social relations is yet another source of (the reproduction of) geographical uneven development, and thus of the specificity of place. An approach which focused on cultural relations or flows (see, for instance, Appadurai 1990) rather than, or as well as, culture areas might make this point easier to appreciate since individual 'places' are precisely located differentially in the global network of such relations. Further, the specificity of place also derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations and, further again, that the juxtaposition of these relations may produce effects that would not have happened otherwise. And, finally, all these relations interact with and take a further element of specificity from the accumulated history of a place, with that history itself conceptualized as the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages both local and to the wider world. In her portrait of Corsica, *Granite Island*, Dorothy Carrington (1984) travels the island seeking out the roots of its character. All the different layers of peoples and cultures are explored: the long tumultuous relationship with France, with Genoa and Aragon in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; back through the much earlier incorporation into the Byzantine Empire; and before that domination by the Vandals; before that being part of the Roman Empire; before that the colonization and settlements of the Carthaginians and the Greeks . . . ; until we find that even the megalith builders had come to Corsica from somewhere else.

It is a sense of place, an understanding of 'its character', which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognize that, without being threatened by it: it would be precisely about the *relationship* between place and space. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place.

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